

Study: Many Conservative rabbis open to officiating at interreligious wedding

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October 22, 2015

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(RNS) A controversial new survey of Conservative rabbis shows that nearly four in ten (38 percent) would officiate at the marriage of a Jewish person to someone of another tradition—if the Conservative movement lifted its prohibition on these unions.

The survey of 249 Conservative rabbis also found that about the same proportion (39 percent) would like their governing body, the Rabbinical Assembly, to discuss whether the prohibition on presiding at intermarriages should be reconsidered. The research was conducted by Big Tent Judaism, a New York-based nonprofit that aims to make Jewish communities more welcoming to intermarried Jewish couples.

Julie Schonfeld, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, said the study, while it raises important issues, comes to unreliable conclusions.

“This is a very serious subject,” she said, noting that the respondents were self-selecting. “This is not a very serious study.”

Schonfeld also said the Conservative movement devoted an entire convention, in 2012, to the sorts of questions posed by the survey, and that it is confronting the issue of intermarriage head on. But “unscientific” and “unrepresentative” studies, she continued, do not bring the community any closer to answers.

Paul Golin, Big Tent’s associate executive director, said that the study is valuable even though its respondents were self-selecting.

“The point of us doing this was to let rabbis know that they may not be alone in their thinking if they were thinking along these lines,” he said. “We hope it will foster a conversation.”

The group isn't advocating that the Rabbinical Assembly change its policy, but rather that it should open a conversation on it, he said.

The Conservative movement, representing about 18 percent of American Jews, according to the Pew Research Center, occupies a middle place in American Judaism. The largest group, the Reform movement, has about 35 percent of American Jews. Unlike the Conservative movement, it accepts as Jewish those whose mother or fathers are Jewish; Conservative Judaism insists on matrilineal descent.

Reform Judaism also allows its rabbis to preside at interfaith ceremonies, though many Reform rabbis require that the interfaith couple intend to raise their children as Jews.

Orthodox Judaism, which claims about 10 percent of American Jews, forbids intermarriage and upholds matrilineal descent.

The Big Tent report also showed that 4 percent of Conservative rabbis surveyed had defied the prohibition on officiating at intermarriages. The issue is fraught within Judaism, as more than half of all American Jews marry outside of their religion and the community worries that its small numbers—about 2 percent of the U.S. population—may further dwindle.

Last year, when a Conservative rabbi asked his Massachusetts congregation to weigh in on whether he should be allowed to marry a Jewish person to a non-Jewish person, the question reverberated in Jewish communities across the nation.

"This is about our children and our grandchildren, and making sure that in this glorious open society, that when our children fall in love—with whomever they fall in love—they know they can always come back to their spiritual home," Wesley Gardenswartz said at the time.

But officially, Conservative Judaism has not budged on the issue, even as it has welcomed the non-Jewish spouses of congregants into its synagogues.

As Schonfeld has put it: "Jewish tradition says Jewish marriage occurs between Jewish people. As rabbis, our role is to teach, inspire, and promulgate that tradition."